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Basic Principles for Interpretation for the Parables of the Synoptic Gospels

Harold L. Phillips
Butler University

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BASIC PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION FOR THE
PARABLES OF THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

by

Harold L. Phillips

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of New Testament

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem and Its Importance

Wide use of the parable in the Synoptic Gospels.--

There are in the Synoptic Gospels large blocks of material couched in a literary form which is called the "parable." This literary form, as used in the Synoptics, varies considerably in style, thus making precise definition of its characteristics difficult. Because of this difficulty various commentators emerge from a study of the parables of the Synoptics with lists varying from 21 to 53. These numbers are the extremes. The average lists of parables vary only from about 30 to 35. By taking a list of 33, which is a practical average, it can be determined that 22 per cent of the words of Jesus as recorded by Matthew, 9 per cent as recorded by Mark, and 24 per cent as recorded by Luke are in this parabolic form.

The parable as Jesus' favorite teaching form.--

Matthew and Luke both contain heavy emphasis upon the teachings of Jesus. Mark has traditionally been recognized as the "action" gospel because of its emphasis upon what Jesus did rather than what he taught. It is interesting, therefore, to note that the percentage of material in parabolic form in

Matthew and Luke is much greater than that of Mark.

We have in our gospels only a small percentage of the actual sayings or words of Jesus, yet certain references concerning Jesus speaking in parables occur over and over again, and lend strong support to the feeling that a large percentage of his teachings was presented in this form. For example:

And he spake to them many things in parables.¹

And Jesus answered and spake again in parables. . . .²

And with many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able³ to hear it; and without a parable spake he not unto them.

Whereunto shall I liken the kingdom of God? It is like⁴

The word "parable" is found 45 times in the Synoptics and only twice in all the rest of the New Testament.⁵ This again gives support to the feeling that the parables are tremendously important as a key to the real teachings of Jesus. They are the most characteristic form of his teaching.

Variety of interpretation.--It is a very bewildering experience to have within oneself this consciousness of the importance of the parables, and then turning to the books on the exposition of them to find such a startling variety of

¹Matt. 13:3 (The American Standard Version is used throughout unless a reference is marked otherwise.)

²Matt. 22:1. ³Mark 4:33-34. ⁴Luke 13:20.

⁵Heb. 9:9 and 11:9.

interpretation, as if the essential teachings of Jesus were nearly incomprehensible. One interpreter approaches a parable and finds in it only a very broad moral platitude while a second emerges from it with an elaborate allegory, and a third comes up with half a theological system which he believes is inherent in that parable.

The major premise.--This paper is launched on the premise that there are discoverable basic principles for interpretation of the parables of the Synoptic Gospels.

Basic questions.--There are a number of questions, pertinent to the solution of this problem, which arise out of this premise. They must be dealt with in order to establish the thesis. These questions are classified here under the groupings into which they seem to fall naturally. Each group of questions will be given attention in one chapter of the paper:

What is a parable? What are the difficulties involved in a precise definition of this literary form? Why do lists of parables vary so greatly in number? How can the parable be marked off from other quite similar forms of literature? What are the basic characteristics of this type of literature?

What are the roots of the parable as a literary form? Did it originate with Jesus? If not, who else used it? And where else can it be found? If there are other parables, what relationships do they have to the parables in the Synoptics?

What major difficulties are encountered in attempting to work out a set of basic principles for interpretation? Are these difficulties insurmountable so that the major premise is definitely discounted?

What basic principles can be discovered? How will various approaches of interpretation stand up under these principles?

Will these principles stand the test of application to various parables?

It is through answering these basic questions that this paper will progress toward the construction of a set of interpretation principles for the parables of the Synoptics. It is felt that principles worked out upon the basis of investigation of these basic questions will be valid, and will stand up in actual exposition of the parables.

The Literature in the Field

There are dozens of books in print which deal directly with the parables. When first beginning work in this field one would expect to find ample aid from this large body of material. However, it is immediately noticeable that very few of the available books deal with the critical problems of the backgrounds of the parables, precise definition of them, or interpretation approaches. Nearly all the available books are expositions of parables rather than attempts to root out principles for dealing with them. Definitions seem to be taken for granted, or else they are worthless as far

as critical study is concerned.¹ If any principles of interpretation are given, they usually appear in a very brief introduction and then the principles given can usually be traced to one of half a dozen more substantial works. After a careful survey of all the books available in a number of libraries, the list of really worthwhile materials was narrowed down to the bibliography as given at the close of this paper.

For purposes of summary and convenience the available materials on the parables can be classified under the following headings:

1. Patristic writings.
2. The old classics in the field.
3. Materials on Jewish backgrounds.
4. Modern interpretation approaches.
5. Exposition samples.
6. Works of German scholars (not available in English).

Patristic writings.--There are a few scattered, but important, references to parable interpretation in the writings of Irenaeus, Chrysostom, and Augustine. These reveal that these men recognized the problem of interpreting the parables, even in their day. Since the references appear as casual remarks rather than treatises on the subject of how to interpret the parables, the books in which they appear have not been listed in the bibliography. However, the references have been footnoted whenever used in this paper, to indicate the exact place where the materials can be found.

¹The classic definition, found over and over again, is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning."

The old classics in the field.--Out of the welter of books written on the parables during the nineteenth century two have survived to be widely known and read today. One is Notes on the Parables of Our Lord, by Richard C. Trench, released in the United States in 1867 after having gone through three editions in England. The other is The Parabolic Teaching of Christ, by A. B. Bruce, released in Scotland in 1882. The copy referred to is the 3rd revised edition, released in the United States in 1898.

1. Trench: This book undoubtedly survived because of the background chapters rather than the expositions of the parables contained in it. There are four introductory chapters dealing with the definition of the parable, the use of the parable in teaching, interpretation principles, and on parables in other literature than the Scriptures. Following this are expositions of 21 parables, expositions that most modern expositors would pass over as not suitable for further use. For example, in dealing with the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Trench labels the traveler as "personified human nature," the oil as "the anointing of the Holy Spirit," the two pence as "either the two sacraments, or the two testaments."¹ He clutters his interpretation with a multitude of allegorical details that becloud the central point of the story entirely. This point will come up for discussion under Chapter V.

¹Richard C. Trench, Notes on the Parables (2nd American Ed.; New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1867), p. 258ff.

Although Trench's expositions are labeled "old fashioned" by many modern expositors, the principles laid down in his introduction are still read with interest. He does not attempt to define the parable in so many words, but he carefully distinguishes the parable as a literary form from the fable, the myth, the proverb, and the allegory. (It is a strange anomaly that he so carefully distinguishes the parable and the allegory and yet in most of his interpretations he treats the parables as if they were allegories pure and simple.) In his second introductory chapter he shows that the teaching value of the parable is great because it is more than just an illustration. It is a profound analogy written into the very nature of things. It proclaims "that the world around us is a divine world, that it is God's world, the world of the same God who is teaching and leading us into spiritual truth. . . ."¹

In the introductory chapter on interpretation Trench mentions a number of very valuable ideas (but promptly ignores them in his own expositions). He warns against "delight in the exercise of ingenuity" in giving meaning to every little detail in each parable, and insists that the proper interpretation requires attention to the central point of the parable and to its context. Another principle which he lays down is that parables may not be made a first source of doctrine.

¹Ibid., p. 22ff.

The final introductory chapter contains valuable allusions to extra-biblical parables to be found in the Rabbinical, Greek, and also early Christian writings.

2. Bruce: In contrast to Trench, Bruce has a rather short introduction in his book, The Parabolic Teaching of Christ, but his expositions are more in keeping with modern approaches. His interpretations are scholarly and careful. Concerning the allegorizing of parables, he writes: "It seems to us frigid, trifling, even pernicious, as tending to blunt our perception of the true, natural sense. When carried far enough it becomes ridiculous. . . ."¹

Materials on Jewish backgrounds.--A number of writers have given special attention to the backgrounds of the Synoptic parables, and there are other books which, although not written specifically for this purpose, do shed considerable light upon these backgrounds. Six works were used in preparing the chapter on backgrounds. These six were found to be quoted again and again by various modern expositors.

1. Feldman: This writer is a Jewish rabbi from the United Synagogue in London. His purpose in writing is to ferret out a collection of the best examples of the Rabbinic metaphors, similies, and parables, with particular emphasis given to those dealing with agricultural and pastoral life.

¹A. B. Bruce, The Parabolic Teaching of Christ (3rd revised ed.; New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1898), pp. 353-54.

He points out specifically that the "metaphors, similies and parables constituted a popular medium of expression which the Rabbis of the Midrash employed for the purpose of impressing upon their audiences religious truths and ethical conceptions."¹ He gives a splendid summary of the types of illustrations they used:

Many other aspects in the life of the people will appear in our collection. We shall note the busy movements of town and village life. We shall meet with the builder, the potter, the dyer, the men of similar arts and crafts, the shopkeeper, the commercial traveller, the money-changer, the hawker, the spice-seller, the dealer in precious stones. Contrasted with these we shall behold pictures of the calm and placid country life, both agricultural and pastoral, with its fields and orchards, its herds and flocks, the tenant-farmer, the field laborer, the shepherd and the watchman. We shall catch a glimpse of the home-life of the people, their serious occupations, their lighter moments and their frivolous amusements, and gain insight into their domestic arrangements, their mode of living, their ways of hospitality, their utensils, their food.²

Feldman cites examples of Rabbinic writings in which all of these are being used by the Rabbis in exposition of the Scriptures. He insists that these metaphors, similies and parables were used to "illustrate and to emphasize more effectively leading religious ideas The primary purpose is unmistakably religious. . . ."³

This work contributes a number of valuable points to study of the Synoptic parables. It shows that the parabolic

¹Asher Feldman, The Parables and Similies of the Rabbis (London: Cambridge University Press, 1924) p. 251.

²Ibid., p. 17. ³Ibid., p. 243.

form was well known to the Jews, that it was a teaching form, and that among the Jews it was used only for religious purposes. It also indicates that the Jews used parables to make truth concrete and plain, not to conceal it. All of these facts will come up as an aid in answering some of the basic questions faced by this thesis.

2. Levison: Much help on local settings of parables can be gained from this work.¹ The author is a native of Palestine, and he brings to his study his actual experiences and observations concerning Jewish customs and life in Palestine. For example, Levison insists that in the Parable of the Ten Virgins we have a perfectly normal story of Palestinian life in which marriage is arranged between two well-to-do families that live at some distance. The carelessness on the part of the virgins constituted a direct insult to the bride, hence the bridegroom's anger.² This is an interesting approach, since B. T. D. Smith, and others, attack part of this parable as being under suspicion as a possible interpolation. Concerning the very verse which Smith rejects³ Levison writes: "There is very little doubt of this being part of the parable; indeed, it is essential to the parable, which would be incomplete without it."⁴

¹N. Levison, The Parables: Their Background and Local Setting (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1926).

²Ibid., p. 243.

³B. T. D. Smith, The Parables of the Synoptic Gospels (London: Cambridge University Press, 1937), p. 100.

⁴Levison, op. cit., p. 240.

This work is of value in establishing the validity of the principle of interpretation termed "The Principle of Local Color," which is discussed under Chapter V.

3. Montefiore: This work is similar to that of Feldman. However, it has a special interest for this paper in that it specifically illustrates the close connections between the Synoptic parables and the Rabbinic parables, as the title suggests.¹ Feldman makes almost no reference to the New Testament. His chief aim is to cite general examples of the Rabbinic parables. He compares them with similar materials in the Old Testament, but not in the Synoptics. Montefiore has gone through the books of Matthew and Luke in commentary or exposition fashion, stopping at each text of these books which has a significant Rabbinic parallel or background. He then quotes the parallel and comments on the probable connections.

He backs up Feldman's statement that the Rabbis used parables as a method of teaching and explaining, rather than concealing, religious truth.

4. Oesterley: This author states his purpose plainly in the title of his book.² The first lecture on the meaning and nature of the parables is followed by eleven

¹C. G. Montefiore, Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd.)

²W. O. E. Oesterley, The Gospel Parables in the Light of Their Jewish Backgrounds (New York: Macmillan Co., 1936).

lectures with emphasis upon the light shed by Jewish backgrounds on the problem of interpreting the parables. Samples of the Rabbinical parables are given and these are contrasted and compared with the Synoptic parables.

5. Smith: This work traces the parabolic form back to the Hebrew mashal in the Old Testament.¹ Special emphasis is placed upon the literary form of the parable, and the problem of distinguishing it from other forms.

Modern interpretation approaches.--The following authors have been taken for typical examples of the modern approach to the parables (it is to be noted that all of these are English scholars. As yet there has been no critical work published in this field by an American scholar.): Cadoux,² Dodd,³ and Murray.⁴ The works by Cadoux and Dodd are quite recent.

Exposition types.--Buttrick,⁵ Martin,⁶ and Barnett,⁷ are splendid examples of modern exposition of the parables.

¹Smith, op. cit.

²A. T. Cadoux, The Parables of Jesus (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1931).

³C. H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938).

⁴George Murray, Jesus and His Parables (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1914).

⁵George A. Buttrick, The Parables of Jesus (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1928).

⁶Hugh Martin, The Parables of the Gospels (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1937).

⁷Albert Barnett, Understanding the Parables of Our Lord (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1940).

However, these works are not as important for this paper as the critical works on backgrounds.

Works of German scholars.--There are in existence important works on the parables by German scholars. These have not been published in English, and no attempt has been made to use them in this paper:

Jülicher: Die Gleichnisreden Jesu

Fiebig: Gleichnisreden

Fiebig: Der Erzählungsstil der Evangelien im Lichte des rabbinischen Erzählungsstils

Summary concerning the literature in the field.--

Books on the parables are plentiful but one can get a comprehensive view of the field by careful attention to Trench and Bruce for older approaches; to Feldman, Levison, Montefiore, Oesterley and Smith for backgrounds; to Cadoux, Dodd, and Murray for modern critical approach; to Buttrick, Martin, and Barnett for modern exposition. A complete study of the problem would require attention to the German works not yet available in English.

CHAPTER II

CHARACTERISTICS AND DEFINITION OF "PARABLE"

Nearly two thousand years ago the Carpenter of Galilee laid aside his apron and tools and set forth upon the dusty Galilean roads "to preach good tidings to the poor to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."¹

He was a Jew, and yet his love knew no racial barriers; he was a Jew and he followed many Jewish customs, yet others he cast aside in order to recapture or proclaim something higher and better; he was a Jew and used many of the teaching forms of the Rabbis, but in him they reached new heights, new freshness, and new appeal.

During his ministry Jesus spoke to multitudes in parables, "and without a parable spake he nothing unto them: That it might be fulfilled which was spoken through the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden from the foundation of the world."²

As has been mentioned in the Introduction, a heavy percentage of the teachings of Jesus are in this literary

¹Luke 4:18-19.

²Matt. 13:34-35.

form which we have called loosely the "parable," or the "parabolic" form. The number of hours spent by scholars, preachers, and even laymen, in pouring over these materials would undoubtedly reach astronomic figures. They have an endless fascination for the New Testament student.

The word "parable" is in such common usage that we think of a parable as having a rather definite literary form which can be pinned down to precise definition. However, this is not the case. The parables of the Synoptics cannot be rigidly defined or classified. Any student of literary forms must beware lest, in his eagerness to define and mark off a literary type, he set up an artificial basis of classification and then project this back onto materials that were not written with any such classifications being in the mind of the original writer. A definition is a convenience for study purposes, but it must be kept in mind that the definition is only a study approach. Because of this definition problem, it is better to search out the basic characteristics and broad outlines of the parabolic type rather than attempt a rigid definition.

παράβολα

Throughout the Greek text of the Synoptics the word *παράβολα* occurs again and again with reference to a certain type of Jesus' teachings. (This word occurs in only two other places in the New Testament.¹) According to Thayer

¹Heb. 9:9; 11:19.

the general significance of the word is "a placing of one thing by the side of another."¹ The specific sense in New Testament usage is essentially the same, "a comparison of one thing with another, likeness, similitude." This word, with its New Testament meaning of comparing one thing with another, gives us a broad base from which to begin in working out the characteristics of the parable.

Characteristics of these Parables

A careful examination of the Synoptic parables reveals the following characteristics:

Comparison.--Fundamentally, as inherent in the word *παράβολον* the parable is a comparison of one thing with another. Such phrases as the following indicate the basic fact of the parable as a form of comparison:

The kingdom of heaven is like unto²
Whereunto shall I liken the kingdom of God?³

Realism.--It is to be noticed immediately that these parables, in their process of comparison, always make use of possible and probable situations, things well known to the listeners. They have a high degree of verisimilitude. They are drawn from the ordinary round of life and nature. There is nothing strained, unreal, or fantastic about them. They speak of such things as a sower that went forth to sow in a

¹Joseph H. Thayer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (New York: American Book Concern, 1886), p. 497.

²Matt. 13:44. ³Luke 13:20-21.

field, a husbandman who was wicked, a fig-tree that was condemned because it bore no fruit, the marriage of a king's son, a treasure that was hidden in a field, a Pharisee and a Publican who went up to the temple to pray.

Religious truth.--All the Synoptic parables are concerned with the portrayal of religious truth in vivid picture-language. They are not represented as just "stories" told to pass the time or entertain the listeners. Each one is a moral or religious argument constructed by placing in a comparison some well known scene of fact of life with some abstract fact in the realm of morals or religion, thus implying or teaching a certain correspondence between the facts of nature and the facts of the spiritual realm. For example, in order to convey to his listeners the abstract truth of the folly of selfish accumulation of wealth, Jesus told a story of a certain rich man whose lands yielded heavily, so heavily that he did not have enough room to store his crops. But his riches and greed had so perverted him that instead of looking about for some worthwhile place to help by giving something, he decided to tear down his barns in order to build larger ones. God called him a "fool" and he did not live to enjoy his selfish luxury.¹

Single-point-emphasis.--Another fact that is noticeable upon reading a number of the parables is that they,

¹Luke 12:16-21.

for the most part, seem to focus on a single point of comparison between the world of nature and the realm of religion. In some cases they seem to have secondary points of emphasis, but still there is always some main emphasis. They are concise, with almost no extraneous detail, only enough to carry the story along. In fact, some of them have no narrative form at all.

Here is an example of the importance of the "single-point-emphasis" principle:

And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that they ought always to pray, and not to faint; Saying, There was in a city a judge, who feared not God, and regarded not man: and there was a widow in that city; and she came oft unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary. And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man; yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her.
¹

By using the principle of single point comparison this parable teaches that this judge and God are alike in that both will listen to a persistent plea. Any further attempt at comparison might involve the interpreter in the paradox of making God unjust. This same principle can be applied again and again although its application to this type of parable is one of its strongest proofs.

Marking off the Parable from other Types of Literature

Thus far it has been shown that the parable in the Synoptics is fundamentally a realistic type of material that

¹Luke 18:1-5.

seeks by the method of comparing well known facts of life and nature with unknown religious truths to portray vividly a religious or moral truth. The progress of definition to this point automatically marks off the Synoptic parable from certain other types of literature.

Myth.--The parable should not be confused with the myth. The myth is a strange blend of truth and tradition, full of speculation which suggests primitive imagination, while the parable is so realistic and true to life that its verisimilitude is never doubted.

Fable.--The fable must be marked off for essentially the same reason as the myth. It violates the natural and the normal order of things and leaves one with a feeling of doubt concerning whether it could possibly happen or not.

Allegory.--The discovery of the "single-point-emphasis" principle makes it necessary to make a distinction between parable and allegory:

A characteristic of allegory, which distinguishes it sharply from similitude and parable, is the fact that it must be interpreted point by point, feature by feature, in order to be properly appreciated. As far as possible everything in the allegory must represent something else: it is description in code.¹

Many details are given significance in an allegory and one cannot discover the meaning without explaining them, while in a distinct parable the details are minimized and a central point is emphasized. The allegorical method is to

¹Smith, op. cit., p. 21.

present a truth through the medium of a series of comparisons, each important to the final picture. The parabolic method is to present a truth in one bold comparison in which the details are either of minor importance or possibly of no significance at all to the central truth.

Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift, and Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan are probably the two best known examples of the allegory as a literary type. When it comes to citing passages in the Bible as allegories, great caution must be used. There is no reference in the Bible to allegory as a literary type. There are references to parables, riddles, and proverbs but no specific textual references labeling any material as allegorical. In the introductory chapter it was pointed out that the student of literary types must use great care in defining and characterizing a literary type and then applying it to materials that probably were not consciously written to fit the frame he has laid out. If this caution must be observed in the case of the parable, it must be observed even to a greater degree with reference to the allegory.

For purposes of comparison we shall refer to the parable and to the allegory as literary types, but such use will have to carry with it the accomodation that has been stated here. Scholars of the parables use these terms for purposes of study. In the Old Testament there are materials that have some resemblance to Gulliver's Travels and Pilgrim's Progress as far as literary form is concerned. We can

classify them together for purposes of study. However, it is understood that the materials of the Old Testament were not consciously written as allegories although the materials of Swift and Bunyan were.

This distinction between allegory and parable is of great importance to this work, and needs to be made very clear. It is emphasized by nearly all modern expositors.

The parable is like a lens, which gathers many of the sun's rays and brings them to focus upon a single point. It is like a circle with many radii of detail meeting at the center, and this center is what the expositor is concerned to find.¹

An allegory is constructed, like a house; but a parable lives, like a night-blooming ceresus. An allegory is constrained; a parable is spontaneous. An allegory tends to deteriorate into a pattern; a parable is a flash of light.²

Another distinction between the parable and the allegory is brought out by the principle of "religious truth" which has been referred to. The allegory can be used to portray religious truth and is to some extent, but it has been used widely for other purposes. The parable is unique in that it is restricted almost entirely to the religious use.

One other distinction between these two literary forms is of importance. It is stressed by Dodd: "While the allegory is a merely decorative illustration of teaching supposed to be accepted on other grounds, the parable has the character of an argument."³ The truth of the parable is

¹George Henry Hubbard, The Teaching of Jesus in Parables (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1907).

²Buttrick, op. cit., p. xvii. ³Dodd, op. cit., p. 23.

inherent in its nature, while the allegory is an "applied" truth.

Types of Material Called παραβολή

Up to this point the basic characteristics of the parable have been given and it has been distinguished from the myth, the fable and the allegory. The next step is to consider the kinds of material designated under the term parable in the Synoptics to see if a system of classification for them can be worked out.

A saying or proverb.--There are many sayings or proverbs in the Synoptics, such as: "And he spake also a parable unto them, Can the blind guide the blind? shall they not both fall into a pit?"¹ And another, "And he said unto them, Doubtless ye will say unto me this parable, Physician, heal thyself."² Many of these are called "parable" in the text; many are not.

Another saying of the same type that does not have any designation in the text, but is obviously similar in nature, is found in Matthew 5:14: "Ye are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid."

A simple comparison.--There are other materials, slightly more complex than these wise sayings or proverbs. They are also designated by the term "parable."

Another parable spake he unto them; The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened.³

¹Luke 6:39. ²Luke 4:23. ³Matt. 13:33.

Or

How shall we liken the kingdom of God? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown upon the earth, though it be less than all the seeds that are upon the earth, yet when it is sown, groweth up, and becometh greater than all the herbs, and putteth out great branches; so that the birds of the heaven can lodge under the shadow thereof.¹

A narrative of comparison.--The bulk of what are ordinarily termed "parables" are narratives used as comparisons. These are called "parables proper" by many of the writers, and most of the materials in the usual lists of parables are made up of forms that fall into this classification. The Parable of the Debtors is a good example of this type.²

The story.--There are some materials in the Synoptics which are termed "parables," yet they do not contain the idea of simple comparison as much as the rest of the materials. They might be termed "example" stories. They are narratives, pure and simple, not figurative. B. T. D. Smith classifies The Pharisee and the Publican,³ Dives and Lazarus,⁴ The Rich Fool,⁵ and The Good Samaritan⁶ in this manner and writes concerning them:

They furnish examples of character and conduct to be imitated or avoided, and, in contrast to the parable proper, they do not teach by analogy but directly: they do not, therefore, strictly speaking belong to "figurative" speech.⁷

¹Mark 4:30-32. ²Luke 7:41-43. ³Luke 18:10-14.

⁴Luke 16:19-31. ⁵Luke 12:16-21. ⁶Luke 10:25-37.

⁷Smith, op. cit., p. 18.

Allegory.--It will seem to be a denial of the principle of "single-point-emphasis" to admit that there are materials in the Synoptics termed "parable" yet having the fundamental characteristics of the allegory. The principle of single-point-emphasis does hold true throughout the great bulk of the parabolic material. It has already been pointed out that types of literature in the New Testament cannot be rigidly characterized. We must not try to force these materials into artificially constructed forms and project these forms back as if the evangelists had the forms in mind when they recorded the materials. We do find a few instances of parables that have allegorical elements in them. They are not pure parables. Also, there are at least two cases of parables that are interpreted in the Synoptics in the manner that we ordinarily apply to allegories.¹

The Definition

It is now evident that the problem of exact definition of the parable is very complex. The writer of any definition must decide whether he is going to limit his definition and his parable list to the group termed "parable proper" or whether every wise saying, proverb and similitude is to be included in the scope of the definition. It is this problem that has given rise to the wide divergence in parable lists. The following examples show the effect of a broad or narrow definition of parable:

¹Parable of the Sower, and Parable of the Tares.

S. Parkes Cadman defines the parable as "a narration of well known scenes or events in human life and its surroundings for the purpose of giving them a moral or religious application."¹ He has limited himself by a definition requiring a parable to be in narrative form. On this basis he arrived at a list of 29 parables.

Buttrick does not apply the "narrative" requirement and comes out with a list of 44 parables.²

Martin's expositions are based upon a list of 34 parables.³

Smith widens the definition to include all the similitudes and many of the wise sayings and proverbs. He has a list of 49.⁴

It appears that it is necessary to fall back upon the general characteristics of comparison, realism, religious truth and figurative language to mark out the parable as a general type and then recognize that in actual usage in the Synoptics the parables vary considerably in length, style, and content. At the same time, the distinctions made between the parable and the myth, fable, and allegory can be kept in mind.

A Real Problem

It might seem that the parable can be pinned down to a more definite deliniation. However, each of the

¹S. Parkes Cadman, The Parables of Jesus (Philadelphia: David MacKay Company, 1931).

²Op. cit. ³Op. cit. ⁴Op. cit.

scholars who has done critical work on the parables has had to face this problem and each has worked out some system of classifying the materials termed "parabolic" in the Synoptics. Three examples of the schemes worked out will show that although different terms are used, the general trend is the same, and each comes out at about the same place:

Oesterley divides the Synoptic parables into four classifications, embracing a variety of forms.¹

1. Simple Saying. (Luke 6:39; 4:23; Matt. 5:13; 5:14; 9:12) "These are all simple straightforward sayings, the meanings of which can be grasped by everyone."

2. Simple Comparison. (Matt. 13:13; 24:13; Luke 11ff) These are "parables in the ordinary sense of the word, which contain a comparison; though these are not necessarily called parables in the text, they are such in their nature. . . ."

3. Allegorical Parables. (Matt. 25:31-46; 13:24-30; Mark 12:1-12) "Of the third type we have not many examples in the Gospels"

4. Parables Proper. "The fourth type comprises the larger number of the great Gospel parables but a comparison is not their only element; mingled with this there is often allegorical and metaphorical elements."

Dodd's scheme of classifying the parables on the

¹Op. cit., p. 12ff.

basis of their literary type given is ascribed by him to the German scholar Bultmann:¹

1. Figurative Sayings. These, according to this scheme, must not have more than one verb.

2. Similitudes. These are marked off by the fact that each does not have more than one verb, and this verb is in the present tense.

3. Parable Proper. This type has a series of verbs, in historic sense. In other words, it is a narrative.

Concerning these types, Dodd writes: "It cannot be pretended that the line can be drawn with any precision between these three classes of parables one class melts into another" ²

Smith maintains that all the parables of the Synoptics represent different types of figurative speech, and are classifiable as follows: ³

1. Simile or metaphor
2. Similitude
3. Parable proper

It is not necessary to develop Smith's outline, because it is very similar to that of Dodd; both of them are following Bultmann's general system.

Summary of Definition Principles

In spite of the complexity of the definition problem, it is now possible to make some concise summary statements

¹Op. cit., 14ff.

²Op. cit., p. 18.

³Op. cit., p. 16ff.

to serve as guide-posts for the future development of this paper:

1. The literature identified by the term in the New Testament is largely cast in figurative speech, ranging in complexity from the simile or metaphor through the slightly more complex similitude or comparison to simple narratives as long as twenty-one verses.

2. This literature can be marked off definitely from the myth, the fable, and the allegory. Its trueness to the facts of life marks it off from the first two and its "single-point-emphasis" differentiates it from the regular type of allegory.

3. The parable, whether simple or complex, is fundamentally a comparison used for the purpose of teaching moral and religious truth.

4. The fact that different scholars have constructed different lists of the Synoptic parables need not be confusing when it is understood that the difference arises in what types of the figurative speech of the Synoptics is included by each in his treatment of the parables.

5. In common usage "parable" refers to the classification of figurative language in the Synoptics which should be termed "parable proper."

CHAPTER III

BACKGROUND OF THE PARABLE AS A LITERARY FORM

In Chapter II attention has been directed to the problem of analyzing the characteristics of the materials in the Synoptics which are ordinarily classed as "parables." It has been pointed out that even though these materials differ considerably in form and length, yet they have certain basic characteristics that warrant their being designated as a literary type or form and which mark them off from other literary types such as the myth, the fable, and the allegory.

Now, a new set of problems arises. Does the parable have any literary history back of the Synoptics? Was Jesus employing a brand new literary device when he gathered the people of Galilee beside the sea and spoke in parables to them? Or were parables of one kind or another already a familiar type of literature to these people? If the parables have a literary history, and if the roots of their earlier use can be uncovered, surely some keys to proper interpretation, and some keys as to the way the Jews would understand a parable will come to light.

This chapter is vitally important to this paper. Many errors of interpretation would be avoided if closer attention were paid to the roots of the parable as a

literary form. Oesterley insists that part of the wide diversity of interpretation can be attributed to failure to give proper attention to the Jewish atmosphere and general background of the Gospel records.

The Parable in the Old Testament

A very natural place to look for possible roots of the Synoptic parable as a literary form is the Old Testament. Reference to Strong's Concordance brings to light the fact that the word "parable" occurs 18 times in the American Standard Version of the Old Testament.¹ A further trace in the same concordance reveals that the translators of the Septuagint (Greek) version of the Old Testament have employed the familiar word, *παραβολή*, in these passages, to translate the original Hebrew word, *mashal*.

This means that there are materials in the Old Testament to which the translators have applied the same Greek and English words that are used to designate the materials of the Synoptics which this paper is attempting to define and interpret. In Chapter II it was pointed out that one of the chief characteristics of the parables in the Synoptics is that they are a comparison of something in the natural realm with something in the realm of morals or religion. The Hebrew word, *mashal*, means "to be like," so evidently these Old Testament materials, regardless of what

¹Num. 23:7, 18; 24:3-15, 20, 21, 23; Job 27:1; 29:1; Ps. 49:4; 78:2; Prov. 26:7, 9; Ezek. 17:2; 24:3; Mic. 2:4; Hab. 2:6, and once in plural form in Ezek. 20:49.

variety of form they may have, are at least similar to the Synoptic parables in that they are comparisons.

These Old Testament references, when analyzed, seem to break down into the following literary types:

The oracle.--The materials referred to in Numbers 23:7; 24:3,15,20,21,23 are commonly known as "oracles" rather than parables, but in translating the Hebrew word mashal, the word παραβολή was used for the Greek, and finally "parable" for the English versions. This is unfortunate because the type of literature referred to in these passages bears little resemblance to anything termed "parable" in the New Testament. For example, in Numbers 24:2-3 the prophet Balaam is represented as having an experience of the Spirit of God coming upon him, during which experience he utters the following "parable":

Balaam the son of Beor saith,
And the man whose eye was closed saith;
He saith, who heareth the words of God,
Who seeth the vision of the Almighty,
Falling down, and having his eyes open:
How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob,
Thy tabernacles, O Israel!
As valleys are they spread forth,
As gardens by the river-side,
As lign-aloes which Jehovah hath planted.
As cedar-trees beside the waters.
Water shall flow from his buckets,
And his seed shall be in many waters,
And his king shall be higher than Agag,
And his kingdom shall be exalted.
God bringeth him forth out of Egypt;
He hath as it were the strength of the wild-ox;
He shall eat up the nations as his adversaries,
And shall break their bones in pieces,
And smite them through with his arrows.
And as a lioness; who shall rouse him up?

Blessed by everyone that blesseth thee,
And cursed be every one that curseth thee.¹

This is an oracle. Balaam, acting as a medium through whom Jehovah is speaking, is eulogizing and praising Israel as a nation. The material is poetic in form, and bears a resemblance to the New Testament parable in that figurative language is used.

Popular proverbs or aphorisms of the wise men.--

The references in Job 27:1; 29:1 and Proverbs 26:7,9 can be classified as popular proverbs or aphorisms of the wise men. The terms "proverb" and "parable" are used interchangeably in the book of Job in a situation where references are made to identically the same type of material. In the exchange of comments between Job and his friends, Job says concerning the wise utterances of his friends:

Your memorable sayings are proverbs of ashes,
Your defences are defences of clay.²

Then, when Job prepares to reply to some of the "proverbs" of his friends, the text reads:

And Job again took up his parable, and said,
Oh that I were as in the months of old³

The references in Proverbs 26:7 and 26:9 plainly indicate that the term "parable" is used in the sense of proverb or wise saying. This is identically the same situation as was found in the Synoptics where the terms

¹Num. 24:3-9. ²Job 13:12. ³Job 29:1.

"proverb" and "parable" are sometimes used interchangeably.

The riddle.--Other references in the list of Old Testament passages where the term parable is used creates another division or type of material included under this general heading. Ezekiel 17:2 reads: "Son of man, put forth a riddle, and speak a parable unto the house of Israel." The material which follows is a story about two eagles. It is a riddle in the sense that it is obscure language and needs to be figured out before it makes sense; it is an allegory in the sense that each detail of the story is given meaning in its interpretation; it is a parable in the sense that material objects are used in a comparison to illustrate spiritual truth.

In both Psalm 29:4 and 78:2 the word parable is associated with the idea of "dark saying" or "riddle":

I will incline mine ear to a parable:
I will open my dark saying upon a harp.¹

I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings of old,
Which we have heard and known,
And our fathers have told us.²

The last reference obviously overlaps with the division on popular proverbs and aphorisms of the wise men.

The allegory.--In Ezekiel 24:2 the "Son of man," the prophet, is instructed to "utter a parable unto the

¹Ps. 49:4. ²Ps. 78:2-3.

rebellious house." The recorded utterance of the prophet is as follows:

Thus saith the Lord Jehovah,
Set on the caldron, set it on,
And also pour water into it:
Gather the pieces thereof into it

Take the choice of the flock,
And also a pile of wood
For the bones under the caldron;
Make it boil well; yea,
Let the bones thereof
Be boiled in the midst of it.¹

The interpretation that follows places a great deal of emphasis upon the details. The caldron is Jerusalem and the bones are the leading citizens who will suffer the pains of fire in that caldron. The material is extravagantly imaginative; it cannot be determined what the prophet meant without the key he has given. Ordinarily, such material and such an interpretation is classed as allegory rather than parable. The situation is similar to that which was noticed in the Synoptics--allegorical types of material have been put under the term "parable."

The taunt.--The last reference in the Old Testament making use of the word "parable" is found in Habakkuk 2:6: "Shall not all these take up a parable against him, and a taunting proverb against him" What follows is a jeering taunt against evil nations and evil doers. They are destined to become examples of the punishment of Jehovah; they will be a proverb and a by-word to future generations.

¹Ezek. 24:3-5.

Similar passages are found in other parts of the Old Testament, although the word "proverb" or "by-word" is usually used instead of "parable":

And thou shalt become an astonishment, a proverb, and a byword, among all the peoples whither Jehovah shall lead thee away.¹

Israel shall be a proverb and a byword among all peoples.²

I will give them up to be a reproach and a proverb, a taunt and a curse, in all places whither I shall drive them.³

And I will set my face against that man, and will make him an astonishment, for a sign and a proverb.⁴

In only one of these passages, Habakkuk 2:6, is the word "parable" included in the various terms given, but it is plain that there is a basic similarity in all these passages.

The parable proper.--It is a strange fact that although the word "parable" is used in all these different senses in the Old Testament (for oracles, popular proverbs, riddles, allegories, and taunts), being applied to materials that are not usually classified as parabolic in the New Testament sense, the two passages of the Old Testament that are plainly and characteristically parabolic in form are passed over without specific textual designation as parables. If reliance upon the actual use of the word "parable" for classification were the only approach made to the Old

¹Deut. 28:37. ²I Kings 9:7. ³Jer. 24:9.

⁴Ezek. 14:8.

Testament materials, these two parables would be missed entirely.

The first appears in II Samuel 12:1-4. The parable is spoken by Nathan to David, and forms an exact parallel in both style and method of use with some of the parables in the Synoptics:

There were two men in one city; the one rich, and the other poor. The rich man had exceedingly many flocks and herds: But the poor man had nothing, save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up: and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own meat, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter. And there came a traveller unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd, to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him; but took the poor man's lamb, and dressed it for the man that was come to him.

David is greatly enraged against the perpetrator of this crime and he declares that the guilty man is worthy of death. Then Nathan says, pointedly: "Thou art the man," and launches immediately into a condemnation of David for his crime against Uriah the Hittite.

The parable in Isaiah 5:1-6 is of a slightly different nature in that it is a parable of warning or threat of judgment rather than one in which wrongdoing is exposed. It is somewhat similar to the passage in Ezekiel 24:3-5, which we have indicated as having more of the characteristics of an allegory than a parable. However, there is at least this much difference: The passage in Exekiel is practically beyond explanation without the key that is given to it; however, the passage in Isaiah could be interpreted even if no

key were given. Its meaning is quite clear. This is another case where one should not be too rigid in his classifications. However, this passage in Isaiah can be classified as "parable proper" with the reservation that has been mentioned.

Summary.--This excursion into the materials of the Old Testament which bears the designation "parable" or which are plainly parabolic in form has been somewhat tedious, but it has made possible some valuable deductions for this study:

1. The word "parable" is not used in any rigid sense in the Old Testament, as applying only to one precise literary form. This is exactly the same situation that was discovered with relation to the use of the word "parable" in the Synoptics.

2. There are two clear-cut examples of "parable proper" in the Old Testament. They bear remarkable resemblance to the Synoptic parables, both as to form and as to manner of use.

3. All the examples from the Old Testament reveal that the word "parable" is always associated with the idea of teaching through figurative language a divine or religious message. The parabolic form is rarely used for entertainment, or as a popular folk-tale. It almost always conveys something of ethical, moral, or religious significance.

4. While the language of these materials is figurative, it is based upon things or ideas well known to the people to whom they are addressed. In the main these materials contain word-pictures drawn from the ordinary life of the people. Spiritual truth is presented through com-

parison with other knowledge the people already have. When Nathan talked with David in terms of sheep and herds, he was certainly on familiar ground.

5. Many of the so-called "proverbs" of the Old Testament are parables in germ form, just as the similitudes in the Synoptics, which, if expanded into narrative form would be typical New Testament parables.

The Parable in the Literature of the Apocrypha

A long excursion into the parable as it is represented in the Apocrypha is unnecessary because the use of the parable in these writings reveals nothing of great significance that was not discovered in the study of the parable in the Old Testament. Various types of parables and figurative speech are present in these writings, however, and some examples and references will be given in passing:

Parables.--There are at least three distinct parables in II Esdras. The most significant is in Chapter 8, verses 2-3:

But I will tell you a parable, Ezra. Just as, if you ask the earth, it will tell you that it produces much more soil from which earthenware is made, but little dust from which gold comes, that is the way with the present world; many have been created, but few will be saved.¹

There are others in Chapter 7:3-5, and 6-9.

¹Translation of Edgar J. Goodspeed.

Allegories.--This type of material is plentiful in II Esdras. The most important example begins at Chapter 11 and continues through the sixth verse of Chapter 12. The writer, in his sleep, has seen an eagle having twelve feather-covered wings and three heads. A long description in figurative language of what happens to this eagle is given. The writer then says, in Chapter 12, beginning at verse 7: "Sovereign Lord, if I have found favour in your sight, and if I am counted upright by you show your slave the meaning and explanation of this dreadful vision." The explanation that follows places peculiar significance upon each event and item in the figurative narrative, thus establishing this as a clear example of the allegory. There is a vivid contrast between this passage and the one cited from II Esdras 8:2-3. The passage from the eighth chapter is figurative language emphasizing a single-point comparison between a fact of nature and a fact in the moral realm. Its meaning is inherent in itself. The other passage is also figurative language, but the emphasis is placed upon a series of comparisons or likenesses which must be explained to give the illustration any meaning. There is a fundamental difference between these two approaches, a difference which must be kept in mind clearly when any interpretation of these types of figurative language is attempted.

Summary.--The summary of the significance of these examples of figurative language from the Apocrypha is essentially the same as given after the section on the use

of the parable in the Old Testament. It is evident that the parable is not a rigid form; it is always a teaching form; figurative language is used; many of the wise sayings or proverbs are parables in germ form.

The Parable in the Rabbinical Writings

In addition to the parables of the Old Testament and the post-Biblical literature there are parables to be found in the writings of the Rabbis, especially the materials prepared by them between 300 B. C. and 200 A. D. These Rabbis wrote materials which are called "Midrashes." These are interpretations and expansions of the various books of the Old Testament. For many years they were never written down, but were passed on orally by the various Rabbis. However, many were eventually written down.

It has been only recently that New Testament scholars have awakened to the fact that knowledge of considerable value for interpretation of the Synoptic parables can be gained by an investigation of this Rabbinic literature.

Feldman points out that the Midrashes are largely made up of similies and parables which are designed to explain a text, incident or narrative in the Old Testament. He writes concerning these Rabbis and their work as follows:

The Rabbis, many of whom were themselves owners of lands and vineyards, seem to have observed the process of field cultivation in all its aspects. They saw the preparation of the soil They watched the grain. . . . They beheld the produce of the land being gathered into the threshing floor and the storehouses. . . . The same applied to the garden and

orchard And similarly they describe the grazing and tending of the flocks and the herds, and note the life of the shepherd and herdsman¹

Smith also comments on the striking parallels between the Rabbinic and Synoptic parables:

In Talmud and Midrash we find parables of sowing and harvesting, sheep-farming and house-building, of stewards and farmhands, landlords and tenants, as well as many others drawn from different environment and unrepresented in the Gospels. There is a Rabbinic story of hid treasure, of a Pharisee and a Publican, of a prodigal son, of a feast meant for others but given to the poor, of guests rejected because unsuitably dressed, of laborers who grumble at the wage paid to others. But it is only rarely that the resemblance between these and the Gospel parables is so close as to suggest any direct relationship, and it is probable that the parallelism is in all cases to be accounted for by the fact that behind both lies a common background of popular tales and illustrations and Scripture expositions²

It is interesting to note that upon examination these materials show the same general classifications as have already been discovered in the Synoptics, the Old Testament and the Apocryphal writings: similies, parables proper, allegories, example stories, wise sayings, and other minor forms. It is impossible to classify them rigidly.

One example of the remarkable parallels between the Rabbinic and the Synoptic parables will perhaps be sufficient for the needs of this paper. The following is a Rabbinic parable similar to the parable of the Two Houses:

¹Feldman, op. cit., pp. 227-228.

²Smith, op. cit., p. 70.

A man who does many good works and has learned much Torah, to what is he like? To a man who builds below with stones and then with (mud) bricks; and when much water comes and stands round the walls, it does not wash them from their place.

But the man who does many good works and has learned Torah, to what is he like? To a man who builds first with bricks and afterwards with stones; and when little water comes it demolishes them at once.¹

The Gospel parable of similar nature is given by Matthew, as follows:

Everyone therefore that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them, shall be likened unto a wise man, who built his house upon the rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.

And everyone that heareth these words of mine and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and smote upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall thereof.²

Many other examples could be cited, but this one is sufficient for the purpose here, to show that there are remarkable parallels between the parables of the Synoptics and those of the Rabbis.

A word of warning is in order. There is general agreement among such scholars as Oesterley and Feldman that:

One cannot, however, fail to notice the immense difference both in subject-matter and treatment and above all, in application, between the Gospel parables

¹Cited by Smith, op. cit., p. 70.

²Matt. 7:24-27.

and those of the Rabbis; interesting and instructive as the latter often are, they stand on an altogether lower plane. It is not prejudice that prompts us to say this--far from that, we have a feeling of warm sympathy with a great deal of the Rabbinical teaching; but we are convinced that any impartial reader of the two sets of parables, the Gospel and the Rabbinical, will be forced to admit that the latter compare very unfavorably with the former.¹

The greatest significance of these Rabbinical parables is not in their parallels with the Synoptic materials, however. The manner in which these parables were used, and the way in which they were understood by their hearers are the important matters. These points will be used in constructing the set of principles in Chapter V.

¹Oesterley, op cit., pp. 10-11. See Feldman, op. cit., p. 244 for a similar statement.

CHAPTER IV

RECOGNIZED DIFFICULTIES IN FORMULATING A STATEMENT OF BASIC PRINCIPLES

In the previous chapters of this paper the parable has been closely marked off from other similar types of figurative literature. It has been defined and then has been traced in its use in the Synoptics, the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, and the Rabbinical writings. It would now seem logical to proceed with the statement of the principles of interpretation for this literature which has been analyzed. However, during the process of analysis certain difficulties have been noticed, difficulties which must be met in some way before proceeding to the statement of interpretation principles.

The Problem of Explaining Mark 4:10ff

No student of the parables can construct a valid set of interpretation principles without attempting to deal with a puzzling problem which arises in relation to the following passage in Mark 4:10ff:

And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parables. And he said unto them, Unto you is given the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all things are done in parables: that seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest haply they should turn again, and it should be forgiven them.

As these verses stand in the Marcan setting, they were spoken by Jesus after he had given the Parable of the Sower. They seem to imply that Jesus used the parables as a means of concealing his message from all but a certain inner circle and that he actually intended that some would fail to understand and would not repent. Both of these ideas seem utterly foreign to the Person of Jesus, as we usually think of him. Some explanation must be made.

Matthew's version.--Some light is shed on the problem by Matthew's version of this same speech:

And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he hath. Therefore speak I to them in parables; because seeing they see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.¹

This version places a totally different construction on the matter. In the Marcan version the implication is that Jesus is purposely concealing truth lest people repent, while the version of the incident given by Matthew is a moral indictment against the people. It is the people who are at fault. They are in such a moral condition that they "seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand."

Old Testament source.--The reference concerning seeing, perceiving, and understanding, as it appears in both

¹Matt. 13:10-13.

the versions, is taken from Isaiah 6:9. The reference in Matthew is continued with the actual quotation by Jesus of the words of the prophet Isaiah:

You will listen and listen, and never understand,
And you will look and look, and never see!
For this nation's mind has grown dull,
And they hear faintly with their ears,
And they have shut their eyes,
So as never to see with their eyes,
And hear with their ears,
And understand with their minds, and turn back,
And let me cure them.¹

The meaning here is plain. This does not remove the difficulty of explaining Mark 4:10ff, but it shows that the conclusion that the parables were used to conceal truth is not warranted. It cannot be established by this one passage, since another version in one of the other Synoptics yields a totally different explanation. Matthew's insistence that the parables were spoken to teach truth, rather than conceal it, is again emphasized in the same chapter:

All these things spake Jesus in parables unto the multitudes; and without a parable spake he nothing unto them: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden from the foundation of the world.²

Evidence from parables in other sources.--Parable usage in the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, and in the Rabbinical writings was examined in the previous chapter.

¹Matt. 13:14-15, Goodspeed.

²Matt. 13:34-35.

In each case it was discovered that the parable was used as a teaching form designed to aid the listeners in perceiving a moral truth. The use of the parable as an aid to understanding truth is inherent in the definition of it as a comparison of a well-known fact of life or nature with a truth in the moral or spiritual realm. If the parables were taught to conceal truth, then our definition falls down completely, and the distinctions we have made between the parable and the allegory are of no avail. It is true that the allegory is often used as a means of concealing a message until the speaker wishes to explain it, but the truth of a parable proper does not require an appended explanation, for the point is inherent in the parable itself.

C. G. Montefiore, who has made a careful study of the parallels between the Rabbinic parables and those of the Synoptics, sensed this problem, and insisted that:

The Rabbis, who made such large use of the parables, were alive to their value as a method of teaching and for the purpose of vivid illustration. Jesus undoubtedly used his parables to illustrate and explain, not to darken or keep concealed, his meaning.¹

Other explanations.--For the purpose of this paper it is probably sufficient to point out that the passage in Mark 4:10ff cannot be taken by itself to build a case against the parables as a teaching form. Such a procedure stands

¹C. G. Montefiore, Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1930), p. 252.

condemned by other passages in the Synoptics, by the usage of parables in other Biblical literature which has been examined, and by prominent scholars in the field. However, there are other explanations made by various scholars, and these will be cited briefly:

Dodd: Now this whole passage [Mark 4:10ff] is strikingly unlike in language and style to the majority of the sayings of Jesus. Its vocabulary includes (within this short space) seven words which are not proper to the rest of the Synoptic record.¹

Levison: We must rule out one of the quotations, [Mark 4:11ff or Matt. 13:10ff] for Jesus could not have made them both. . . . We cannot help concluding that the explanations given are personal explanations of the authors of our first and second Gospels.²

Oesterley: This scholar insists that the problem is that of trying to get a proper rendering of the Hebrew in Isaiah 6:9-10. The delicate shade of meaning in the Hebrew was lost in the Greek translation, thus giving a wrong sense to the Marcan version. He insists that Matthew's rendering of the quotation is the more accurate.

Smith: The Marcan theory registers the fact that some of the parables had become obscure with the loss of their context.³

In other words, he believes that the exact contexts of many of the parables were lost before Mark wrote his gospel. Since Mark could not understand some of them, he felt that they must have been given to conceal the truth from all

¹Op. cit., pp. 13-14. ²Op. cit., pp. xiv-xv.

³Op. cit., p. 51ff.

except the elect.

Summary.--It is not necessary to establish a satisfactory explanation of Mark 4:10ff. It is only necessary to show, as has been done, that it is a problem passage because it presents a different viewpoint on the parables than the rest of the Synoptic references. As the basis for a theory it is discredited by plain evidence from many sources that the parable form was always used as a teaching device, rather than a concealing device.

The explanations given by Dodd, Levison, Oesterley, Smith and others raise more questions than they answer. They are interesting, but they are not necessary to establish the principles of interpretation upon which this paper will rest.

Traditional Approach Allegorical

Allegorical interpretation¹ of the parables began at a very early date in the history of the church. All kinds of absurd interpretations were put forward, most of

¹A distinction should be made here. Up to this point certain contrasts have been drawn between the parable and the allegory as literary types. Caution has been expressed against pushing the distinctions harder than the materials warrant. But at this point a different line of approach comes in, that of allegorical interpretation. This approach of interpretation has a wider application than just to the explanation of allegories; it has been applied to all kinds of materials when men wanted to give them mystical, secondary, or hidden meanings. For example, it is possible to take a portion of Old Testament history (not an allegory as regards literary type) and give the historical details some special or mystical significance and thus construct an entirely new meaning for the material. This is called "allegorization," and the term is so used in this paper. This distinction between allegory as a literary type and allegorization as a method of

them making something out of every minute detail in each parable. Irenaeus found it necessary to warn against improper approaches in interpreting parables:

And therefore the parables ought not to be adapted to ambiguous expressions. For, if this be not done, both he who explains them will do so without danger, and the parables will receive a like interpretation from all. . . . But to apply expressions which are not clear or evident to interpretations of the parables, such as everyone discovers for himself as inclination leads him is absurd. For in this way no one will possess the rule of truth; but in accordance with the number of persons who explain the parables will be found the various systems of truth, in mutual opposition to each other, and setting forth antagonistic doctrines, like the questions current among the Gentile philosophers.¹

Evidently excessive allegorization of the parables had already led to much confusion, and to opposing systems of teachings derived from the same parable. Irenaeus does not actually state that parables must not be allegorized, but he decries the tendency of the commentators of his time toward excessive allegorization which led each writer to extremes of interpretation. In another passage, after explaining what he terms the "absurd interpretations" of one group that was excessively given to placing special emphasis upon numbers, such as the ninety and nine in the Parable of the Lost Sheep, he says:

interpretation should be kept in mind in order to determine clearly what is meant where the term "allegorization" is used in this paper.

¹Irenaeus against Heresies, Book II, XXVII, 1.

I well know, my dear friend, that when thou hast read through all this, thou wilt indulge in a hearty laugh over this their inflated wise folly!¹

Irenaeus' general position in regard to the parables was that in no case was some ingenious explanation of a parable to be regarded as the original or exclusive foundation of a doctrine.

Despite these warnings the parables continued to be the favorite playground of ingenious allegorizers. In the time of Chrysostom, the trend was still toward allegorization of the parables but still the warnings against this method were being issued:

And, as I am always saying, the parables must not be explained throughout word for word, since many absurdities will follow²

The saying is a parable, wherefore neither is it right to inquire curiously into all things in parables word by word, but when we have learnt the object for which it was composed, to reap this, and not to busy one's self about anything further.³

The method of allegorization reached its greatest heights in Augustine, who fixed it in the church for centuries to come by his extreme interpretations. For example, in his interpretation of the Parable of the Ten Virgins, the following details are given significance:

¹Ibid., Book I, XVI, 3.

²Chrysostom, Homily XLVII.

³Ibid., Homily LXIV.

1. The number "five" was used because we have five senses.
2. The term "virgins" indicates that this means church members.
3. The oil signifies charity.
4. The night signifies ignorance.
5. The vessels mean the hearts of the people.¹

Smith offers an explanation for the popularity of this approach:

Allegorical interpretation affords a means whereby the venerated traditions of the past may be brought into line with the ideas and beliefs of the present. It enabled the Stoic to discover pantheism in the Greek mythology, the Hellenist Jew to discover Greek philosophy in the books of Moses, the Rabbi to discover edification even in the place-names of the Old Testament, and the Christian to discover the Gospel in the Law. Some of the parables of Christ, robbed of their contexts, offered a very obvious field for the application of the same method. By its aid they could be regarded as prophetic oracles, communicating "things hidden from the foundation of the world." Since the allegorical interpretation of the parables began very early and at a time when the Christian tradition was very fluid, it has left its mark²

It has only been in recent years that this allegorical approach has been called into question with a sufficient force to cause many expositors to abandon it. Trench, in the nineteenth century, began to see the light, although after referring to the warnings of Chrysostom and Origen

¹Augustine, Sermons on New-Testament Lessons, XLIII.

²Smith, op. cit., pp. 27-28. Also see pp. 44-45.

and adding one of his own in his introduction, he proceeded to use it himself, although in a modified degree.¹

The German scholar, Jülicher, set the stage for the present approach to the parables, which emphasizes them as true parables, rather than allegories.² This is of tremendous importance to this paper. If we are to interpret the parables as allegories, we may as well give up any attempt to construct a set of interpretation principles, since in allegory every man is on his own and can make out of them anything he wishes. At least some uniformity of approach and interpretation will come out of the application of a valid set of principles approaching the parables as parables.

Form Criticism

About 20 years ago a new school of Gospel research sprang up in Germany. It has been called "Form Criticism," from the German formgeschichte. It must be treated briefly in this paper because it is a major approach to the Synoptics at the present time, and it has deep implications for the interpretation of parables.

The purpose of form criticism.--The form critic tries to recover the original forms in the gospels. He endeavors to "study the development of the oral tradition prior to its crystallization in the Gospels, prior even

¹Trench, op. cit., Introduction

²Jülicher, Die Gleichnisreden Jesu

to the written documents or cycles of fixed tradition upon which they appear to rest"¹ The method of approach is to classify the materials of the Gospels on the basis of their form.

Basic assumptions of the form critic.--In tracing forms, the form critic follows certain assumptions:

1. He assumes that there was a period of oral tradition prior to any written materials, and that during this oral period materials became relatively fixed and circulated in small units without context or setting.

2. He assumes that it is possible to classify all the materials of the Synoptics on the basis of form.

3. He assumes that there are certain "laws of tradition" which governed the formation of the materials, and that the originals can be reconstructed by discovering these laws.

4. He assumes that the Synoptic materials, as we now have them, have no chronological, biographical, or geographical value. In other words, according to the form critic we cannot place any trust in the setting of a parable in the Synoptic material. Bultmann, a typical form critic, insists that:

It may be seen quite clearly that the original tradition was made up almost entirely of brief single

¹Frederick C. Grant, Form Criticism (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Co., 1934), preface.

units (sayings or short narratives), and that almost all references to time and place which serve to connect up the single sections into a larger context are the editorial work of the evangelists.¹

Contributions of form criticism.--It cannot be denied that form criticism has made some significant contributions to New Testament study. It has drawn attention to the "life situation" (Sitz im leben) in which the Synoptic materials were born, stimulated the search for the original forms, and has helped to solve some passages that have puzzled New Testament scholars for a long time. It has established definitely that some of the materials in the Synoptics, such as the Passion Story, existed in a fairly definite oral unit before it was ever written down in manuscript form.

Relation to this study.--If we accept the findings of the form critic without reserve, the problem of constructing a set of principles for interpretation of the parables is immensely complicated. The assumption of form criticism that is most complicating for this study is the insistence that the chronology and settings of the Synoptic materials cannot be relied upon. For example, according to the setting in the Gospel of Luke, the parable of the Good Samaritan was told in response to the question of a certain lawyer who asked, "Who is my neighbor?"² In attempting to

¹Ibid., p. 25.

²See Luke 10:29.

interpret the parable, it would be only natural that considerable emphasis would be placed upon this setting. But the form critic would cast a shadow of doubt on this setting, claiming that probably the parable itself was afloat in the oral tradition for some time without any context or setting, and that the present setting in Luke is one manufactured by the gospel writer, or at the very least is artificial.

The weaknesses of form criticism.--To the candid observer the form critic seems to take too much for granted in these assumptions of his. He cannot make them without disregard for the eye-witnesses who surely must have had influence over both the oral and later the written gospel materials. The form critic is highly subjective in his approach and no two form critics agree on their classifications. Each works out his own system.

There are other weaknesses. It is necessary for the form critic to ignore many of the findings of literary criticism, and to brush aside the patristic evidences in order to make his assumptions tenable. He places too low an estimate upon the Person of Jesus by ascribing most of the tradition to the Christian community, thus leaving to Jesus only a very minor role as a prophet who was overglorified by his followers. In this system, even the immediate disciples of Jesus are thrust aside into a grossly exaggerated classification as "simple fisherfolk." The men of the early church were willing to give their lives for the very truths that the form critics are so ready to brand as editorial constructions.

Summary.--For the purposes of this paper, the trends of the form critic will be kept in mind, but it will be remembered that this approach is a theory of Synoptic research, not a thoroughly established or widely accepted method. We will not try to establish the interpretation of a parable solely upon its context, but will examine other factors. Thus we will not be obliged to cross swords with the form critic very often.

CHAPTER V

A STATEMENT OF BASIC PRINCIPLES

The previous chapters have all been necessary before a statement of basic principles could be made. It was necessary to define the characteristics of the parable, mark it off from other similar literary types, study its background in older literature, and then to acknowledge and give treatment to certain difficulties to interpretation before attempting to set forth any interpretation principles. This work has been done in sufficient detail to form a background for this chapter. It is to be noticed that this background undergirds the interpretation principles in many ways.

The Principle of "Single-Point-Emphasis"

In Chapter II it was pointed out that "single-point-emphasis" is one of the main characteristics of the parabolic type of literature. Sometimes there are details in parables, but usually they are noticeably secondary or else they all contribute to the main emphasis. The true parable comes to a focus on one basic truth that is true in both the natural and the moral or religious realm. As was pointed out in the last chapter, failure to recognize this principle led to the establishment of a traditional interpretation approach which has allegorized the parables until their true and most

important meaning has often been lost. Even early scholars of the New Testament warned against this approach, but their warnings were largely unheeded and it has been only in recent years that this method of interpretation has been repudiated by nearly all of the scholars who have made critical studies of the Synoptics.

Here is a clear example of this principle of "single-point-emphasis," in addition to the previous references.

Another parable spake he unto them; The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened.¹

Application of the principle of "single-point-emphasis" requires that we seek the fundamental point of comparison between the idea of leaven working in meal (in the realm of life and nature) and the kingdom of God working in the world (a truth in the moral or religious realm). Now leaven is a silent permeating force that works an inward change in the meal into which it is placed. By comparing this with the kingdom of God, Jesus was stating that one of the characteristics of this kingdom would be that it would have a powerful transforming influence upon the society into which it was placed. This is the essential meaning of this parable. Jesus did not mean to say that the kingdom of God is like leaven in all points. Leaven is essentially a

¹Matt. 13:33.

ferment. It can do both the work of leavening bread or spoiling some other food. The comparison is restricted to the one point of contact.

Now, see what can be done with this parable if the "allegorizing" process is introduced in trying to interpret it. The allegorizer, instead of rooting out the essential or main meaning of the parable, immediately seizes upon details of no particular consequence and departs into a maze of speculation about why a woman instead of a man put the leaven in the meal, why the number 3 was used instead of some other number and other irrelevant problems. Here are some of the possible meanings of the use of the number 3 that have been suggested:¹

1. It prophesies the "spread of the Gospel through the three parts of the world."
2. It represents "the ultimate leavening of the whole human race, derived from the three sons of Noah." (Augustine's interpretation)
3. It is a promise of "sanctification of spirit, soul, and body." (Jerome and Ambrose)
4. The leaven signifies humanity and the number three is used because man is made up of "three elements, spirit, soul, and body."

It is easy to see that this type of speculation spoils the purity of the parable and beclouds its true and most important meaning. Such interpretation reduces this parable from universal truth to speculation within the realm

¹Trench, op. cit., p. 118.

of a theological system. As universal truth it is timeless and can speak its message to all men everywhere; bound within some narrow theological system it is hampered, beclouded, and its use is restricted to those who accept or understand the system into which it has been forced.

Just how far astray one can go by using this allegorical method is illustrated by G. Campbell Morgan's interpretation in which he states that "the thing of primary importance is not the leaven, and not the woman, but the three measures of meal."¹ This is indeed a strange statement to make since both the woman and the leaven are the active agents in the parable while the meal is only an inert mass which is acted upon by the other two. It is not necessary here to go into the complete interpretation which he makes. By a curious twist he bends the parable to fit a particular theological tenet which he champions.

Examples of the wild speculations that have been put forth as interpretations of the parables by the use of this allegorization method could be cited almost without end. The Parable of the Good Samaritan has received about the worst treatment from the allegorizers.

Concerning this, Martin writes:

Allegory has run riot with this parable. The man is humanity. The brigands are the devil. The priest and the Levite represent the law and the

¹G. Campbell Morgan, Parables of the Kingdom (Fleming H. Revell, 1907) p. 116.

prophets. The Samaritan is Jesus. The oil and the wine are divine grace. The ass is the body of Christ. The return of the Samaritan is the second coming of Christ.¹

This parable has been so interpreted by a good many writers, but this robs it of its essential meaning, the purpose for which it was spoken, and leads one from the clear impact of its teaching concerning one's neighbor off into a barren land of speculation.

Such parables as "The Importunate Friend"² and "The Unjust Judge"³ are strong arguments in favor of the "single-point-emphasis" approach. If the allegorical approach is applied to either of these, one immediately becomes involved in deep waters. Are we to admit that God is unjust, that he answers prayer only when forced to, that he gives grudgingly to those who ask long enough? A true understanding of the nature of the parable, as has been set forth, clears away these difficulties. God is like the Unjust Judge and like the man who loaned the bread at midnight only in the sense that he will reward persistence and patience. At that point the similarity stops and nothing more is implied by the true nature of the parable.

Levison, following the "single-point-emphasis" approach, makes this interpretation of the Parable of the Unjust Judge:

Here is a judge, a person lacking in regard for God or man, who would not see that justice is

¹op. cit., p. 118. ²Luke 11:5-9. ³Luke 18:1-8.

done to a poor widow, who yet in the end, because of personal fear, administers justice; and shall not God, the just, holy and righteous One, administer justice?¹

Further treatment of this parable will be given under a later principle of interpretation that will back up this approach.

Before leaving this section attention should be called to the fact that there are two parables in the Synoptics which are interpreted in an allegorical manner.² Complete analysis of this is a problem of sufficient magnitude for another complete thesis. It can be pointed out that these do not come under the classification "parable proper." It has been admitted previously that the parable form cannot be pinned down rigidly. There are some allegorical elements present, especially in these two parables, but this does not furnish sufficient grounds for maintaining that all the parables should be interpreted as allegories. It is this particular problem that gave rise to much of the allegorical approach. The peculiar problems involved in the interpretation of such parables as The Unjust Judge and The Importunate Friend have already been stated. These, along with the weight of evidence still to be set forth in other principles, make an overwhelming case in favor of the interpreting of these materials as true parables. It has already been pointed out that there is not a rigid difference between the

¹Op. cit., p. 185.

²The Parables of the Sower and of the Tares

allegory and the parable as literary types. However, this does not give any license for using the allegorical method of interpretation on materials that are predominantly parabolic in form.

The Principle of Self-Interpretation

The first principle stated is the most important of all and is basic to all the rest that will be stated. This second principle, as well as the others that are to come, lend support to the first, and, taken together, they are being put forth as a valid method of approaching the parables of the Synoptic Gospels.

It is noticeable upon reading the parables that a good many of them are either prefixed by, or contain, or end with some statement that furnishes a key to their meaning. Also, the meaning of some seems to be very apparent on the surface, practically inescapable. They interpret themselves by a comparison that explains itself. Some choose to ignore these keys, and proceed to work out their own interpretations. The allegorical approach violates these verses constantly. Here are some examples:

And he spake a parable unto them to the end that they ought always to pray, and not to faint.¹

And he spake also this parable unto certain who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and set others at nought.²

For every one that exalteth himself shall be

¹Luke 18:1. ²Luke 18:9.

humbled; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.¹

The first of these is a prefix to the Parable of the Unjust Judge, the second a prefix to the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican and the third is the closing verse of the Parable of the Lowest Seat at the Feast.

The Form Critics, as has been noted, object to some of these, trying to establish them as being the work of the editors of the material rather than the actual words of Jesus. But Form-Criticism has not succeeded in winning the field of New Testament scholarship over to its position on this as on many other points.

The Principle of Context

There is a difference between this principle and the previous one. The Principle of Self-Interpretation applies only when there is an actual interpretation associated in the text with the parable. The Principle of Context refers to the incident with which the parable is associated, the circumstance which gave rise to its utterance. We do not have this in every instance, but there is a very clear context for many of the parables. One of the best examples is the Parable of the Lowest Seats at the Feast:

And he spake a parable unto those that were bidden, when he marked how they chose out the chief seats; saying unto them, When thou art bidden of any man to a marriage feast, sit not

¹Luke 14:11.

down in the chief seat; lest haply a more honorable man than thou be bidden of him, and he that bade thee and him shall come and say to thee, Give this man place; and then thou shalt begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest place; that when he that hath bidden thee cometh, he may say to thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have glory in the presence of all that sit at meat with thee. For every one that exalteth himself shall be humbled; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.¹

In this case the parable arose out of a concrete situation in which Jesus noticed the tendency of men to exalt themselves to a higher station than they rightfully deserve. The key to interpretation lies in this context. It indicates that the parable has to do with the problem of humility. To make something else of it is to do violence to the text.

Another parable was spoken immediately after this one. It is commonly known as the Parable of the Great Supper. The key to the situation is given in the early part of the chapter: "And it came to pass, when he went into the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees" ²

The application of this principle rests partially upon another point already established. Jesus spoke these parables to convey truth to his listeners. These Jews were used to the parabolic method. It was used in the Old Testament, in the Apocryphal writings, and their own Rabbis used it as a teaching form. The primary meaning of a parable is the meaning that Jesus intended to convey to his immediate

¹Luke 14:7. ²Luke 14:1.

listeners. This must be discovered if possible. The contexts are keys to these primary meanings and should not be ignored.

The violation of this one principle has given rise to the absurd interpretations of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Note the context:

And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and made trial of him, saying, Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? And he said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou? And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.¹

But the lawyer questioned him further, saying:

And who is my neighbor?²

Jesus told the parable as a direct answer to that question and closed it with the statement:

Go, and do thou likewise.³

This is a clear case of where a context furnishes the meaning of a parable, the meaning that Jesus gave to it, and the use he made of it in an actual situation.

There is nothing to prevent an allegorizer from taking this story-parable as it is and, chopping off the context, apply it anyway he wishes, placing any fantastic construction on it that may come to his mind, or he may use it to bolster his theological system, but he cannot logically

¹Luke 10:25-27. ²Ibid., vs. 29. ³Ibid., vs. 37.

pass off this interpretation as exposition of the New Testament or as the meaning which Jesus intended to convey. There can be no hope for any kind of uniformity or consistency in parable interpretation as long as interpreters ignore the true nature of a parable and the context in which it resides.

The Principle of Local Color

In addition to the principles of single-point-emphasis, self-interpretation, and context there is another closely allied principle which can be termed the "Principle of Local Color." In addition to the setting in life, or context, as regards the occasion for the parable, there has to be taken into account the local color or background of the narrative itself. Would his listeners be acquainted with the comparison from life that is used in a particular parable? If so, what meaning would they attach to it? This principle pertains to the customs of the people, typical agricultural and business activities, and other everyday occurrences with which the people were familiar.

Tristram relates an incident that throws considerable light on the Parable of the Unjust Judge. The incident happened in Bible lands. He came upon an open hall, next to a prison. The hall was serving as a court of law. He describes the scene:

On a slightly raised dais at the further end sat the kadi or judge, half buried in cushions. Round him squatted various secretaries and other

notables. The populace crowded into the rest of the hall, a dozen voices clamouring at once, each exclaiming that his cause should be first heard. The more prudent litigants joined not in the fray, but held whispered communications with the secretaries, passing bribes euphemistically called fees, into the hands of one or another. When the greed of the underlings was satisfied, one of them would whisper to the kadi, who would promptly call such and such a case. But meanwhile a poor woman on the skirts of the crowd perpetually interrupted the proceedings with loud cries for justice. At length the judge impatiently demanded, "What does this woman want?" Her story was soon told.¹

He goes on to relate how the woman finally succeeded in getting her petition granted by the process of pestering the judge until he was tired of listening to her outcries.

Now, if this is in any way an accurate picture of the kind of justice with which the people of Jesus' time were familiar, it is easy to see how vivid the parable would be to them. They would not be slow to catch the meaning. If an unjust judge like this would listen to the plea of a woman, how much more would God listen to the persistent outcry of those who were being wronged or needed help.

Another parable that is greatly enhanced by a knowledge of its local color is that of the Lost Coin:

Now all the publicans and sinners were drawing near unto him to hear him. And both the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them. And he spake unto them this parable, saying

. . . . What woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a lamp, and

¹H. B. Tristram, Eastern Customs in Bible Lands (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1894), pp. 228-29.

sweep the house, and seek diligently until she find it? And when she hath found it, she calleth together her friends and neighbors, saying, Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I had lost.

Even so I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.¹

This coin probably belonged to a string of silver pieces, which every Nazareth woman wore in her hair. These strings of coins, or semadi, as they were called, were greatly treasured heirlooms that were handed down from generation to generation, mother to daughter. The picture is of a poor woman who did not have a large string, and the loss of even one was a major calamity. When she became conscious that one was gone, she lighted a candle (there were no windows in the small houses of the poor) and searched for it. She swept her earthen floors diligently till she found it, and then she called in her neighbor ladies to rejoice with her. And thus the Master pictured the joy of the Father in the recovery of the sinful. In so doing he rebuked the Pharisees and the scribes for lack of concern for the lost. Instead of rejoicing over the fact that Jesus was carrying a message of hope to the publicans and sinners, they murmured over the fact that he associated with them.

One more example will be sufficient to illustrate this principle of local color:

Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, who took their lamps, and went

¹Luke 15:1-3, 8-10.

forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For the foolish, when they took their lamps, took no oil with them: but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. Now while the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there is a cry, Behold, the bridegroom! Come ye forth to meet him. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are going out. But the wise answered, saying, Peradventure there will not be enough for us and you: go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. And while they went away to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut. Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not.¹

Smith says that a "wedding-procession and the wedding-feast were the two principal features of the Jewish marriage ceremonies."²

This seems to be a perfectly normal story of Palestinian life. A marriage has been arranged between two well-to-do families that live at some distance. The carelessness on the part of the five virgins was a direct insult to the bride, who usually picked her closest and most trusted friends to go forth to meet her bridegroom on the way. For them to be unprepared at the crucial moment of his arrival was an extreme social error. When they arrived late the bridegroom, who would not know them personally but would be very conscious of the fact that they had insulted the friendship of his bride, told them pointedly that he did not know them and shut the door in their faces. This story undoubtedly had a rich and pointed meaning to Jesus' listeners.

¹Matt. 25:1-13. ²Op. cit., p. 98.

Levison, who was raised in Palestine and is a Jew, insists that it is a true-to-life story, although some commentators refuse to accept it as a true life illustration.¹

Tristram cites illustration after illustration that throws light on the background of the Synoptic parables. He tells of how prominent men of Bible lands give huge feasts. Invitations are sent out to nearly everyone in the neighborhood by public proclamation in order to get a capacity crowd. A man is disgraced if there are empty places at his feasting tables. In order to protect the feelings of some of the poorer guests, garments are issued to each guest as he enters. Tristram attended such a feast "where the father of the bridegroom, a wealthy man, supplied a cloak to each guest as he passed the threshold. We accepted one, to conceal the peculiarity of our European costume."²

This same author writes of having seen a great feast given by a Bedouin sheikh. Tremendous preparations were made, including the roasting and slaughtering of kids and lambs. The guests were ranged according to rank from the highest tables on an elevation down to the crippled, blind, and infirm. Great bowls of food were set before the upper guests who dipped in with their hands, gorged themselves and passed whatever was left on down to the lower tables. The final remains were passed on out of the tent to beggars who stood outside. These in turn cast the bones and refuse

¹Compare Levison, op. cit., p. 240 and Smith, op. cit., p. 100.

²Op. cit., pp. 83-84, and compare with Luke 14:16-24.

to a circle of dogs sitting patiently beyond them.¹

Patient inquiry into the real life situations out of which these parables came will provide a splendid antidote to the tendency to allegorizing them or attempting to bolster doubtful systems of theology by them.

The Principle of Chronology

Because of the difficulties involved in any attempt at constructing an exact chronology of the life of Jesus, let alone the point at which he may have uttered a certain parable, this principle of chronology will be leaned on rather lightly. Nevertheless, it is of importance, and should be included in this list. A number of modern expositors make use of it, although they do not rest their entire case for the interpretation of a parable on this one point.

Buttrick attempts a chronological arrangement of the parables in his expositions, making the following assertion concerning the worth of this approach, and also its limitations:

The arrangement suggested in this book is an attempt, undoubtedly vulnerable, to arrange the parables in approximate natural sequence. The endeavor is foredoomed to failure, because our knowledge is insufficient to give any promise of full success. But a study of the gospels (especially such a study as has produced the best "Harmonies"), the context of the parables, and the intrinsic message of the parables ought to make possible an arrangement which,

¹Ibid., pp. 84-45, and compare with Luke 14:6-14.

if not chronological, will at least suggest how His mind unfolded under the impact of events and the beckoning of God. Such an arrangement is here intended. . . .¹

Proceeding in this fashion, this author divides the parables into three chronological classifications:

- I. Parables of the Early Ministry
- II. Parables of the Later Ministry
- III. Parables of the Passion Week

Despite all the limitations of this approach and the possible objections that may be raised to it, it does have some value. Even though it may err in details, yet it probably results in considerable accuracy in its broad outlines, thus fitting various parables into their proper places in the ministry of Jesus. Such a method places the parables of the Kingdom from Matthew in the early ministry when Jesus was announcing the principles upon which his Kingdom is to be based; it places such parables as that of the Good Samaritan in the second period of the ministry during which Jesus was setting forth the essential conditions for discipleship; it leaves the parables of controversy and judgment to be emphasized in their proper setting at the close of the ministry of Jesus. These classifications of the parables are to some extent artificial, but they give some aid in interpretation.

It is interesting to note that Martin² and Barnett³

¹Op. cit., p. xxviii. ²Op. cit. ³Op. cit.

also write their expositions from an attempted chronological outline because of the worth of tracing "the development of the teaching in response to the developing situation."¹ This, again, places emphasis upon the parable as a teaching device that was used on the spur of the moment to meet a specific situation that called for an answer.

Martin does not attempt any other classification than that of order. Barnett attempts both the order and a rough classification into three geographic and time divisions.

1. Parables that belong to Jesus' ministry in the vicinity of Capernaum.
2. Those that are a part, especially in Luke, of the account of the journey through Perea to Jerusalem.
3. The parables of the Passion Week.

It can be seen immediately that this scheme is very similar to Buttrick's, which was just cited.

The Principle of Consistency

This is a final hurdle that any exposition of a parable must clear before it can be accepted as a true representation of what Jesus meant to convey when he spoke it. No interpretation of a parable that conflicts violently with other, and more plain, teachings of Jesus should be accepted. Whatever interpretation is put forward must square with the general teachings of Jesus, insofar as we can determine them. Also, since a parable by its very nature sets

¹Martin, op. cit., p. 41.

forth universal truth, it would be inconsistent to give interpretations to various parables that would result in conflicting teachings. This is what usually happens when the principles of single-point-emphasis, self-interpretation, context, local color, and chronology are disregarded in favor of the free imagination of the allegorizers. They usually emerge with a set of interpretations that are not consistent with each other, or are too limited by the theological framework into which they have thrust the materials.

CHAPTER VI

THE PRINCIPLES IN USE

In the preceding chapter a statement of interpretation principles has been put forth, backed by various examples from the Synoptic parables. Of necessity these examples had to be drawn from a wide variety of parables in order to illustrate properly the points involved. Also, what seem to be the most clear examples of each principle were chosen. Now, in actual use, not all the principles may apply to each parable, neither is it necessary to use them in any given order, except that the principle of consistency should be the final test. It seems fitting that now that the principles have been set forth with various examples they should be applied specifically to a few parables to see how they work out as a method of exposition approach.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, who both stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance a certain priest was going down that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And in like manner a Levite also, when he came to the place, and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion, and came to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on them oil and wine; and he set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow he took out two shillings, and gave them to

the host, and said, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, I, when I come back again, will repay thee.

And Jesus said unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.¹

This is a much-abused gem that has been robbed of its beauty and essential meaning by all kinds of fanciful allegorical interpretations. Application of the basic principles of parable interpretation will preserve its true meaning, and emphasize its beauty:

The Principle of Context.--This parable has a context. A lawyer asked Jesus a question, "Who is my neighbor?"² Jesus told the story by way of reply. Thus we know that the interpretation must have to do with the question of neighborliness.

The Principle of Self-Interpretation.--The closing sentence, taken together with the context practically interprets the parable as follows: "You have asked me to define your neighbor; I have pointed out that any man in dire distress, regardless of race, is your neighbor; you go and practice this neighborliness and good will as the Samaritan did."

The Principle of Local Color.--Martin makes an interesting contribution on the background of this parable:

The road is unique on the earth's surface. In the course of some twenty miles it plunges over three thousand feet, from Jerusalem on its hills down to the Jordan valley.

¹Luke 10:30-35, 27.

²Luke 10:29.

The road is probably also unique for its desolation, devastation, and dryness. . . . There are rocks and caves in plenty to hide the bandits and shield their escape.

So it was no farfetched story that Jesus told, but probably a most ordinary occurrence. Josephus tells us the road was known as "the bloody way."¹

Also, the feelings that the Jews had toward the Samaritans is well known. Jesus could not have picked a better nationality in order to universalize neighborliness for the Jews who listened to him.

The Principle of Chronology.--This principle makes no significant contribution in this case, except that it would place the parable in the middle period of Jesus' ministry when he was emphasizing the duties of discipleship.

The Principle of Single-Point-Emphasis.--The context and the self-interpretation go together to focus the emphasis of this parable upon its picture of good neighborliness. The details are vivid but they come to focus on the one great truth of the parable; to allegorize the details is to blunt the edge of the central truth.

The Principle of Consistency.--The interpretation given certainly squares with the general teachings of Jesus. He placed great emphasis upon neighborly concern for our fellowmen, including those of other races, of lower social rank, and those who had been cast out by society in general. He both taught and practiced this neighborliness.

¹Op. cit., pp. 112-113.

The Parable of the Hid Treasure

The kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure hid-
den in the field; which a man found, and hid; and in his
joy he goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth
that field.¹

The Principle of Single-Point Emphasis.--The picture portrayed in this parable is simple. A man discovers a treasure in a field; he sells all that he has in order that he might buy the field and possess the treasure. Transfer this truth from the realm of the natural to the realm of the spiritual and it signifies that the Kingdom of God is a rich treasure, which, when men find it, will cause them to give everything else up in order that they might possess it. They will joyfully surrender all other values that they might obtain this one. The parable states terms of personal entry into the kingdom--the surrender of everything for it.

Allegorizers have multiplied all kinds of speculation about this parable. Some say the field is the Holy Scriptures and the treasure is the knowledge of Christ contained in it. Others say the field is the Church in its outward manifestation to the world and the treasure is found when a man perceives the church as being something more than a human institution.² Morgan twists the parable around until the man who finds the treasure is Christ, who, because the world rejected his kingdom, hid it again, and "postponed for the world the coming of His kingdom."³ This twist is

¹Matt. 13:44. ²Trench, op. cit., p. 127.

³Op. cit., p. 143.

necessary to fit the parable into the author's premillennial views. As in others of his interpretations, he takes a minor detail (the hiding of the treasure after it was found) and makes it the crucial point. It has already been noted that in his interpretation of the Parable of the Leaven he insists that the meal (the only inert or nonactive thing in the parable) is the most important and that he interprets the parable on the basis of an allegorical meaning of the meal instead of going straight to the heart of the parable, the active leaven which transformed the meal.

This is another demonstration of the importance of emphasizing the central meaning of the parable, and not glorifying the details by allegorizing them.

The Principle of Self-Interpretation.--When this parable is interpreted as a parable its meaning is inescapable. It is a comparison between a man's actions when he finds a treasure in a field, and when he finds the kingdom of God. The subject is indicated by the text and the meaning lies open upon the surface of the parable; it is essentially self-interpretive.

The Principle of Context.--There is little context help for this parable; in this case none is needed. It is sufficient to note that the parable appears in a group of parables, all of which pertain to various phases of the kingdom. It emphasizes one phase of kingdom.

The Principle of Local Color.--Buried treasure was in the time of Jesus, and still is, a fairly common thing.

Society was in a disrupted and nonorderly state. Men had to bury their treasures to save them from the ravages of military conquerers and lawless brigands. Many men died, leaving treasure buried somewhere to be turned up by the plow of some peasant.

Some commentators comment on the problem of the ethics involved in this story. Was it right for the man to conceal his knowledge of the treasure while negotiating for its purchase? Various clever dodges have been constructed to get around this. But it is not necessary if the true nature of the parable is kept in mind. It is an illustration or comparison that hinges on one point of comparison. The thing compared is the joy of the man and his willingness to give everything up to possess the field. The parable does not profess to deal with any other point. This is a problem similar to that found in such parables as the Unjust Judge, the Unjust Steward, and the Importunate Friend. It is a thorn for the allegorizer; those who interpret parables as parables have no problem on this point.

The Principle of Chronology.--The parable falls in the early period of Christ's ministry when he was setting forth his teachings concerning the Kingdom of God, both to the multitudes and to the inner group that followed him.

The Principle of Consistency.--The interpretation laid down is consistent with the other teachings of Jesus. The principle of surrender of all to gain the kingdom is reiterated again and again in various ways and shades of meaning:

If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever would save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it.¹

He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that doth not take his cross, and follow after me, is not worthy of me.²

But seek ye first his kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.³

When Morgan finishes his interpretation, fitting the parable into the premillenarian scheme he has the problem left upon his hands of explaining away every teaching of Jesus that indicates that the Kingdom has already come in a very real sense. A large part of the allegorical interpretations of the parables founder on this principle of consistency.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

The parables being used in this chapter are of widely different types. The first treated was of the moral story type. The second was the similitude type which contains no conversation. This next one is a parable proper, according to the classifications we have laid down.

Then came Peter and said to him, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? until seven times?

¹Matt. 16:24-25. ²Matt. 10:37-38.

³Matt. 6:33.

Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, who would make a reckoning with his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, that owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not wherewith to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And the lord of that servant, being moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out, and found one of his fellow-servants, who owed him a hundred shillings: and he laid hold on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay what thou owest. So his fellow-servant fell down and besought him, saying, have patience with me, and I will pay thee. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay that which was due. So when his fellow-servants saw what was done, they were exceeding sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. Then his lord called him unto him, and saith to him, Thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou besoughtest me: shouldest not thou also have had mercy on thy fellow-servant, even as I have mercy on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due. So shall also my heavenly Father do unto you, if ye forgive not every one his brother from your hearts.¹

The Principle of Self-Interpretation.--The parable is largely self-interpretive. It is plain that it is a parable about forgiveness. It teaches that forgiveness is a spiritual rather than a legal act, and God, because of the very nature of forgiveness, cannot forgive apart from the forgiveness that we give to others. It is a parable with a terrific impact when its edge is not blunted by excessive attention to the details.

The Principle of Single-Point-Emphasis.--In this case this principle is tied up closely with that of self-interpretation. The nature of forgiveness is the central

¹Matt. 18:21,23-35.

theme. Again in this parable those who wish to literalize and allegorize get into trouble. Are we to believe that God revokes pardon once given and in a mood of anger flings a man into torment? The parable teaches that in the Kingdom of God forgiveness is of such a nature that one must forgive to be forgiven. This is all the interpretation necessary for exposition of this parable as a parable. It does not imply likeness between the characters or natures of the "certain king" and God. Some of the details of the parable are important in a general way, for example, the extreme contrast between what the men owed, but these details should not be pushed until the central point of emphasis is distorted or forgotten.

The Principle of Context.--This parable has a context. It was told after the disciples had been discussing the question of greatness in the Kingdom and Peter had asked a direct question concerning how often one should forgive his brother. Even if this context were called into question it would make no difference in the interpretation since the theme is inherent in the parable itself.

The Principle of Local Color.--Martin points out that there was a rabbinic rule that required forgiveness at least three times.¹ Peter was, he thought, quite generous in suggesting that the number be raised to seven times.

¹Op. cit., p. 107.

Jesus, by the parable, showed the true nature of forgiveness, that it could not be placed on any such legalistic basis.

The Principle of Chronology.--This principle seems to have little or no value in this particular case.

The Principle of Consistency.--The teaching of this parable, as interpreted, is directly in line with other teachings of Jesus:

For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.¹

And the unforgettable lines in the model prayer which Jesus taught his disciples:

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.²

These are but a few of the examples that can be cited. The entire body of parables can be treated in this manner. As has been stated, not every principle is of equal importance, nor can each one be applied to each parable, but taken together they constitute a valid and fruitful approach for parable exposition.

¹Matt. 6:14.

²Matt. 6:12.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the beginning of this paper the thesis was laid down that there are discoverable basic principles for consistent interpretation of the parables of the Synoptic gospels. The case for this premise has been built along the following lines:

The characteristics of the parabolic form have been pointed out, and the parable has been carefully distinguished from similar types of figurative speech such as the myth, the fable, and the allegory.

The background of the parable as a literary form has been traced to discover the manner in which the parable has been used. Great similarities of both style and use were discovered in parables of the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, and the writings of the Jewish Rabbis, thus indicating that the Jews were familiar with the parabolic method. It was found that the parable was always used for religious teaching to make obscure truths clear by vivid comparison between a known fact or situation of the natural life with a fact or truth in the spiritual realm.

Certain difficulties in formulating this statement have been admitted, but it has also been shown that these

difficulties are not insurmountable, and that they do not prevent the construction and use of a valid set of interpretation principles.

The following six principles of interpretation have been put forward:

1. The Principle of Single-Point-Emphasis.
2. The Principle of Self-Interpretation.
3. The Principle of Context.
4. The Principle of Local Color.
5. The Principle of Chronology.
6. The Principle of Consistency.

These principles have been illustrated by parabolic materials in the Synoptics.

The six principles have been demonstrated in use on three parables. It has been shown how these principles support each other in indicating the interpretation of a parable. Also, incorrect interpretations have been pointed out. It has been indicated that certain approaches, such as that of allegorizing the parables, blunts their edge and beclouds their true meaning. The principles set forth in this thesis, when carefully applied, bring out the central meaning of the parables with sparkling clarity. They give proper emphasis to the parables as a teaching device designed to make plain, rather than conceal, truth.

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